

HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 5: The Early Daoists – Hermits, Shen Dao, and Laozi Section 10: Mohist Anti-language Challenge to Daoism

- Mohists: After Mozi, groups of disciples are interested in objective standards of language use.
- Mohist linguistic analysis: 以言為盡悖,悖也 - To treat all language is not permissible, is not permissible.
- 悖 defined in their explanations of this *Canon* as 不可 *bu ke*^{not permissible}.
- Thus, to treat all language as not permissible, is not permissible
 - Reason: If language is bad, then saying so is also bad.
 - This self-defeating charge faces all those adopting an anti-language stance.
- Similar to the 'paradox of the liar'
 - "This sentence is false".
 - Paradox: If it is false, then it's true. If it is true, then it's false.
 - Semantic paradox: the meaning of the sentence makes it paradoxical.
- Consider the sentence: "All sentences are false"
 - This sentence has a self-rejecting structure (but is not technically a paradox).
 - If it is true, then it is false. However, if it is false... there's no problem.
- "To say all language is bad is bad" seems to entail "some language is acceptable".
- Fundamental Mohist insight: need to look carefully to decide which sentences are acceptable; you cannot say they are all bad.
- Thus, the alleged Daoist doctrine "all language distorts the 道 *dào*^{path}" distorts the 道 *dào*^{path}.